

**Declaration of Independence:
The “Electric Cord” that Binds Us**

Bryce O. Stenzel, St. Clair, MN



The American Bicentennial celebration, in 1976, was a major event. Planning for it started several years in advance. Both public and private schools designed their curriculums around it, with units on the American Revolution, biographies of personalities associated with it, school programs that featured patriotic songs and stories, and flag displays. Even Mankato’s children’s summer reading program used the Bicentennial as its theme. As a nine-year-old boy, at the time, I remember going to the Public Library on South Broad Street (today’s Carnegie Arts Center) to check out books and get them recorded on my checklist, so I could win a prize, for a specified number of books I read. Sibley Park’s front entrance sign was even painted with red, white, and blue lettering, to honor the occasion; as was the playground equipment, in the children’s play area, on the riverside portion, of the park.

On one occasion, during the hot, dry summer of 1976, my dad brought home a star-spangled cardboard poster tube, containing a facsimile copy of the Declaration of Independence, which he gave to me. I recall carefully pulling it out of the tube, unrolling it, and carefully studying the words it contained. Even though the cursive print was hard to read, and there were many words I didn’t yet understand; I realized that this piece of paper had special meaning—it was more than a piece of imitation parchment. What it actually contained was an idea that my dad (who fought in WWII), and countless other generations had fought to maintain. This same idea or “proposition,” as Lincoln called it, was what set the American Revolution apart from all other wars of independence, before, or since. It is the notion that “*all men [people] are created equal.*” Because of this, we are entitled to “*life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,*” meaning that we have the choice to pursue our individual interests and personal preferences, according to our natural abilities.

With this in mind, it should be obvious why the upcoming American Semiquincentennial of the Declaration of Independence is an event of lasting significance. However, it doesn’t seem to be generating nearly as much excitement as the Bicentennial did, fifty years ago. The *Atlantic* magazine recently published an article in its July 2026 edition, pointing out that the reason may be that Americans don’t believe as if they have as much to unite around, as in past generations. While that very well may be the cause for the malaise, I disagree with that belief. In fact, I would like to challenge it, by pointing out that there were many problems that beset the United States in 1976: end of the Vietnam War, record inflation, an oil embargo, and even a presidential election. There is an equal number of challenges back in 1876: it too was a presidential election year—the eve of the most divisive presidential election ever held in this country. Reconstruction in the South was ending. The country was recovering from an economic depression; and General George Custer’s entire command had just been slaughtered at the Little Big Horn. Yet, in both centuries, Americans found ways to pull together and celebrate the nation’s birthday--regardless of the many issues that either confronted or divided them. This current generation needs to do the same thing—put aside

our current differences and reflect on what truly unites us as a people—**that same, timeless principle of equal opportunity for all, contained in the Declaration of Independence.** Abraham Lincoln understood this when he stated, *“I have never had a feeling, politically, that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence.”* He also described the Declaration as an “electric cord,” in a July 10, 1858 speech, given in Chicago:

...There is something else connected with it. We have besides these men [the founders] — descended by blood from our ancestors—among us perhaps half our people who are not descendants at all of these men, they are men who have come from Europe—German, Irish, French and Scandinavian— men that have come from Europe themselves, or whose ancestors have come hither and settled here, finding themselves our equals in all things. If they look back through this history to trace their connection with those days by blood, they find they have none, they cannot carry themselves back into that glorious epoch and make themselves feel that they are part of us, but when they look through that old Declaration of Independence they find that those old men say that "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal," and then they feel that that moral sentiment taught in that day evidences their relation to those men, that it is the father of all moral principle in them, and that they have a right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration, and so they are. That is the electric cord in that Declaration that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men together, that will link those patriotic hearts as long as the love of freedom exists in the minds of men throughout the world.

In his First Inaugural Address, given on March 4, 1861, Lincoln again referenced this “electric cord,” when he stated: *“...the **mystic chords of memory**, stretching from every battle-field and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”*

Independence Day, 2026, was about more than fireworks displays, barbeques, and a date on the calendar (there was a Fourth of July, in North Korea too; but those people didn’t celebrate it the way Americans did. They were not allowed to.). It was an opportunity to dust off that “old Declaration of Independence,” the way my dad had me do, and reconnect with the principles that made this country what it is. This was our time as Americans to celebrate what makes us, and our nation special. Hopefully, you had the opportunity to do just that. **Happy Independence Day!**

